Synchronicities in Sobriety: The Role of the Deep Acausal Psyche in Recovery

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Introduction

Recovering from addiction is a road full of struggles, though it is not without help. Sometimes there are experiences on this journey that are so improbable and meaningful that they seem to come from the divine intervention of a Higher Power. These moments are notoriously difficult to explain, though a concept from Depth Psychology may be useful in understanding them: Synchronicity. This paper will explore the role of synchronicity in recovery from addiction by defining the meaning of synchronicity, exploring three examples from *The Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous as synchronicities, and interpreting these synchronicities depth psychologically using the commitments of Depth Psychologists Coppin and Nelson in *The Art of Inquiry*. By defining and interpreting these events depth psychologically I hope to shed light on these mysterious, critical moments in recovery when a seemingly coincidental occurrence can save a life.

What Is Synchronicity?

Like love, synchronicity is something that is more easily experienced than explained. Jung himself, who coined the term which he defined as "meaningful coincidence" (Jung, 2010, p. 144) even grappled with explaining this psychic phenomenon, and offered observations of the commonalities of these experiences as criteria for the term rather than

reducing it to a single mechanism. In his book, *Synchronicity: Nature and Psyche in an Interconnected Universe,* Jungian scholar Joseph Cambray summarizes these elements as “meaningful coincidence, acausal connection, and numinosity” (Cambray, 2012, p. 12) which are helpful in assessing an event, such as recovery, could be a synchronicity.

Let us unpack each element. First, the term meaningful coincidence requires that the two events within the occurrence are similar in some way to each other, or have the same “meaning.” Le Grice writes that in synchronicity, the “interior meaning (our subjective experience of meaning) is reflected externally in the world at large” (Le Grice, 2010, p. 121). Whether the coincidence is of two external events that is then reflected internally in the observer’s consciousness, or one inner event coinciding with one outer, there must be a meaningful connection in the meaning given between the two simultaneous parts of the moment.

Second, acausal connection requires there to be no causal explanation for the two events’ occurrence in time with each other, along with an improbability that the event should happen. Jung explains acausality thus: “Just as in a living body the different parts work in harmony and are meaningfully adjusted to one another, so events in the world stand in a meaningful relationship which cannot be derived from any immanent causality” (Jung, 2010, p. 75). Though admittedly in the present day and age we have adopted a more mechanistic approach to the human body, the metaphor of a meaningful relationship rather than cause and effect is

helpful in understanding Jung's notion of the acausal characteristic of synchronicity. One can accept relationality without needing to derive causality in synchronicity. Thus there is no cause, yet still such a strong connection such that "their chance concurrence would represent a degree of improbability that would have to be expressed by an astronomical figure" (Jung, 2010, p. 21). They are therefore acausal but connected in meaningful improbability.

The third criteria is numinosity, which relates to the idea that archetypes provide the "affective charge that can manifest in the feeling of numinosity" (Cambray, 2012, p. 13) that accompany synchronicities. The activated archetypes have an affect that is present during the synchronicity. In other words, " synchronistic phenomena, Jung discovered, 'seem to be connected primarily with activated archetypal processes in the unconscious" (Jung quoted by Le Grice in Archetypal Cosmos, 2010) Thus, the third aspect of synchronicity is its numinosity that is connected to the activation of an archetypes and that the observer experiences to have spiritual or supernatural meaning.

Synchronicities in the Stories of Alcoholics Anonymous

An area where similarly inexplicable events can be found is recovery from addiction. In recovery, terms such as "rock bottom" refer to transformative moments that lead to the transition into sobriety. These experiences often involve accepting help and/or guidance from surrendering one's rationality to a Higher Power. There can be an almost frustrating

inexplicability to it, as so many attempts by those trying to help did not result in their transformation, yet a chance event results in the switch and sometimes even complete lift of the addiction. Getting sober is notoriously difficult, and often alcoholics will say it took a power greater than themselves to bring them to a place where they were ready for sobriety. It is possible that these experiences of a Higher Power could be categorized as synchronicity, and that perhaps this categorization can result in the bringing together of two worlds attempting to describe the inexplicable (synchronicity and recovery) and a greater explicability of these events. *The Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous is full of personal narratives of alcoholics' journeys to recovery. Here I will consider three stories of Alcoholics Anonymous from *The Big Book* as possible synchronicities and then explore how these synchronicities might be interpreted in terms of Jungian psychology from philosophical commitments in Depth Psychologists Coppin and Nelson's *The Art of Inquiry*. In this way, we can understand the psychological roots of synchronicity and explore the ways in which we experience, relate to, and comprehend the spiritual.

The first example is from a story titled "Women Suffer Too" in Part I Chapter 3 of *the Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous, which includes a message delivered to an alcoholic at a crucial moment. The woman had developed the need to drink in response to anything that arose in human relationships, from socializing publicly to private life. Her husband was also an alcoholic, and after their divorce she went to live abroad for a full

drinking career. Upon her return to the United States she sought treatment but still managed to drink in the sanitarium. Finally, her doctor gave her the Alcoholics Anonymous *Big Book* to read. In the potential synchronicity, there is an experience of anger which is then transformed to freedom from the habit of drinking. She describes:

> "Then the miracle happened—to me! It isn't always so sudden with everyone, but I ran into a personal crisis that filled me with a raging and righteous anger. And as I fumed helplessly and planned to get good and drunk and show them, my eye caught a sentence in the book lying open on my bed: "We cannot live with anger." The walls crumpled—and the light streamed in. I wasn't trapped. I wasn't helpless. I was free, and I didn't have to drink to "show them." This wasn't "religion"—this was freedom! Freedom from anger and fear, freedom to know happiness, and freedom to know love." (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 206).

According to the first element of synchronicity, this example demonstrates a meaningful coincidence as the anger in her internal life coincided with the message that caught her eye in *the Big Book* about not being able to live with anger. The inner world of her situation of feeling anger is reflected meaningfully in the line of text in the outer world. It is an example of how in synchronicity "it is as if the cosmos knows what we are thinking and feeling" (Le Grice, 2010, p. 122), and is as if the universe "knew" that she was angry. The meaningful message shows "a dialogue

between the self and the world" (Le Grice, 2010, p.123) as the correspondence between her inner anger and the outer message establishes a meaningful translation of the shared meaning. *The Big Book* reflected her feeling of anger back to her, the meaning of inner anger coinciding with the meaning of the outer text, thus a meaningful coincidence.

This example illustrates the second element of an acausal connection, as her anger did not cause the book to be open to that page. Her state merely coincided with the message on the open page. There is also an improbability due to chance that her anger would coincide with that exact phrase on that page. Le Grice notes that " if one were in a deeply troubled state of mind … and, at that very moment, something unexpected were to happen in the outside world that seemed to relate uncannily and specifically to one's dilemma, Jung would call this an instance of synchronicity (Le Grice, 2010, p. 121). The unexpected uncanny relation of feelings that occurred *with* her troubled state of mind rather than a result of it contributes to the classification of this event as a synchronicity through the element of acausality.

Third, this example contains the element of numinosity specifically with the imagery of light streaming in after an activated state of anger. Right after she reads the text about not being able to live with anger, her whole state shifts, as she describes, "the walls crumpled" which reflects how the archetype of trickster can bring liberation in a sudden change, she even describes it as "sudden". Further, the fact that the message that was

conveyed was a lesson about her anger is evidence of the constellation of the trickster as “he symbolizes the unexpected interruption into awareness of truths hidden away from the ego” (Combs and Holland, 2001, p. 104). There is an unexpected interruption of her anger, through the mirroring of the almost comedically timed synchronous message, which then opened the door for a feeling of freedom from the ego. This moving away from the ego is reflected in her subsequent relational word choice of “knowing feelings” and “love”.

Further, the event was revelatory in that she could distinguish the numinous feeling from “religion”, perhaps suggesting through saying it was not religion in that it was not a passive belief with rigidly defined parameters, but rather a first-hand experience of extraordinary forces that she was free to meaningfully interpret for herself. This demonstrates how “synchronicities, on occasion, may come with the force of a spiritual revelation” (Le Grice, 2010, p. 123), and her “knowing” freedom is an example of this sort of revelatory experience. In the rest of the story the alcoholic feels empowered to accept difficult feelings as they arise and do something about it through the fellowship of the program, free from repeating the pattern of drinking thanks to what she learned from the synchronicity.

The second example is from a story titled “A Drunk, Like You” in Part II Chapter 15 of *The Big Book* and includes a coincidence that happened to an alcoholic who lost his job and decided to drink on his flight to a job fair. He

had previously tried to stop drinking as it was interfering with his family life, making him angry and difficult to be around. He was also suicidal, which led him to seek help where the advice was to try to limit drinking and go to meetings, which he did and had actually earned a 90-day chip. However, he relapsed on the plane after he lost his job and convinced himself that he wasn't an alcoholic. He recounts:

> "I drank for the whole flight—before dinner, during dinner, and after dinner. As we approached our destination, I searched in my pocket for a pen to fill out the in-flight magazine response card. I found this large coin. I took it out to see what it was. It was my ninety- day pocket piece, and I was reminded of what I was doing. And the thought came to me: Wow, those guys at the meeting were right—I am powerless over alcohol. I put that coin back in my pocket and from that day to this, some 15 1⁄2 years later, I have had no urge to drink. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 404)"

This example qualifies as a meaningful coincidence in that the coin represented the meaning of powerlessness over alcohol which he was succumbing to in his drinking on the flight. There is a simultaneity here in the correspondence of his inner psychic state of alcoholism and the outer instance of the chip. One might argue that the 90-day chip is the opposite of the state he was in while relapsing, but this could be a case where synchronicity acts with a commensurate compensatory meaning. Le Grice

indicates in *The Archetypal Cosmos* that “Jung discovered that synchronicities, like dreams, often serve a compensatory function in that they counterbalance the partial, one-sided perspective of the subjective ego” (Le Grice, 2010, p.123). Here the 90-day chip would be the compensatory synchronicity from the excess one-sidedness of his drinking in a form of enantiodromia. There is shared meaning in the oppositional mirroring of symbolism of alcoholism and sobriety.

This example is acausal as he did not intentionally bring the coin with him on the plane where he would make the decision to drink throughout the flight. His drinking did not cause him to have the coin in his pocket, and the coin in his pocket did not cause his drinking. Further, probabilistically, it is unlikely that he would have the chip in his pocket on a flight where he would choose to drink. The simultaneous meaning of powerlessness in the inner and outer state occurred outside the causation of him reaching into his pocket to find a pen.

This example contains numinosity in how complete of a transition to receptivity it was. Finding the coin was enough for him to not only admit he had a problem, but also completely lose the urge to drink. There is a revelation in realizing that he was willing to accept that he was powerless over alcohol and that the people in AA were right. He even uses the colloquialism of “wow” in understanding the message of fellow alcoholics. The archetypal component involved in the numinous transformation can be seen in the trickster as Hermes rules coins (Atsma, 2017), like the one the

alcoholic found in his pocket. The trickster is evident in that he was at a proverbial transition point on the plane flying to a job fair, and “since synchronicities abound at times of transition, we can also expect to find the trickster present at such times” (Combs and Holland, 2001, p.xix). This synchronicity was enough to not only help him stop drinking to find his next job, but also maintain sobriety for the next 15 years in the program. One might argue that just being a part of a transition is not necessarily numinous, sometimes one moves through the crossroads in a way that is not emotionally charged. In this example, however, the numinosity comes from the fact that the synchronicity worked, albeit not causally. The coin synchronicity coincided with the transition from one chapter of his life to the next, the numinosity being in mark of an ending and beginning.

The next instance of possible synchronicity is from the story called “Empty on the Inside” from Part III Chapter 10 of *The Big Book*, and is the story of a woman who had grown up around AA with an alcoholic father yet still resisted the identification of alcoholic. She drank socially all through high school and then on her own during her marriage and family life. She got divorced, and after she lost her job, she contacted her father to tell him that she had gone to an AA meeting. He sent her a package that had his AA book in it. This was not enough, though, to stop the drinking. It was not enough to stop her drinking that her children had to go live with her mother, or that her father passed away. The treatment centers were also not enough to make her stop. What catalyzed her sobriety was a moment of

surrender in her apartment after not being able to bathe, answer the phone, or show up to visit her children on weekends. She writes:

> “Something made me go dig through a box, and I found the Big Book my father had sent me years earlier (I always tell new people to buy the hardcover version—for some reason they are harder to throw away). I read “Bill’s Story” again. This time it made sense. This time I could identify. I slept, holding the book like a teddy bear. I woke up feeling rested for the first time in months. And I didn’t want to drink. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 516)”

This example could be considered a meaningful coincidence in that the book made itself available to her at the time she needed it most, and the meaning of her state of powerlessness over alcohol coincided with Bill’s Story of powerlessness over alcohol. Le Grice writes that synchronicity can be present as “the opportune and inadvertent discovery of just the right book that one needs to shed light on a particular situation or problem” (Le Grice, 2010 p. 121). Here the synchronicity is a rediscovery of *the Big Book* that her father had sent her years earlier to finally shed light on the particular situation and problem of her powerlessness over alcohol. Though the book had been there all along, the synchronicity was that she discovered it again at the moment she needed it the most and “this time it made sense” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 516). Though her inner state had probably mirrored the outer state of alcoholism in the book many times

before, in this instance there is a parallel state of humility between her situation and Bill's story, and thus there was enough receptivity to a call for sobriety in her state to finally understand the message in the *Big Book*.

There is an element of acausality in this example in the idea that she identifies "something" that made her dig through the box and find the book as a sort of unknown factor. It is also not clear that she was looking for the *Big Book* specifically in digging through the box, and that her state of powerlessness over alcohol caused her to find it. There is thus acausality in the discovery of the right book. There is also a characteristic acausality in contrast to the other instances of what could have been cause and effect of reaching for *the Big Book*, such as her divorce or losing custody of her kids. These events could have logically led her to look for help in the AA *Big Book*, but instead the book found her when she needed it at her personal crossroads, perhaps the trickster also activated in the proverbial call to adventure to sobriety. Further, her finding the book was improbable as so many past situations did not lead to it, it took that extra "something" to bring her to the right book at the right time.

In this example there is numinosity in the clarity and readiness the alcoholic woman demonstrated to finally understand the content of the book followed immediately by her restful sleep. The archetype activated is the trickster in Hermes, in this instance the characteristic of Hermes being the god that can put to sleep and wake up with his staff (Atsma, 2017) as illustrated by her awakening to the *Big Book* followed by restful sleep.

There is numinosity in the fact that this time she was able to understand the message in the book. Further, her sleep after reading the *Big Book* demonstrates the result of archetypal activation and how the "the affect produces a partial abaissement du niveau mental" (Jung, 2010, p. 29), or lowering of the level of consciousness as she slept holding the *Big Book* like a teddy bear. This resultant lowering of the threshold of consciousness after the synchronicity was followed by the transformation of not wanting to drink the next day. Though she admits that she did end up drinking later on, this call to adventure opened her up to a receptivity to eventual sobriety. On reflection she suggests that it is possible to have more than one "moment of Grace" from God (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 517) perhaps more than one is necessary for a complete shift into sobriety. In this instance, the fact that she had a moment of clarity followed by sleep after acausally discovering *the Big Book* suggests this was a meaningful coincidence in service to her recovery.

Synchronicity and Depth Psychology

To summarize, up to this point, I have considered three stories in *the Big Book* as possible synchronicities. These were reading a line that corresponds directly to one's inner state in a sort of dialogue with the cosmos, finding a chip during a relapse, and re-discovering the *Big Book* at a moment of weakness. Having considered these moments in an alcoholic's recovery as synchronicities through the three criteria summarized by Cambray, I will interpret these synchronicities as depth psychological

manifestations of psyche by drawing upon the philosophical commitments from Coppin and Nelson's *the Art of Inquiry*. These commitments are that the psyche is both personal and more than personal, the psyche is multiple and relational, and the psyche is symptomatic (Coppin and Nelson, 2017). These Depth Psychological principles that describe commitments to the psyche can further shed light on the synchronicities in recovery in the context in the deep psyche. In this way I hope to interpret synchronicity in recovery from addiction depth psychologically.

First, the commitment that the psyche is both personal and more than personal reflects how synchronicity can bring the alcoholic back into a participation with the world as the personal has contact with the more than personal. Addiction can lead to the shrinking of the addict's world and can be so lonely that the person experiencing the addiction, one can feel trapped in their individual psyche. The synchronicity, however offers an opportunity for a change of attitude that is oriented toward a relational perspective with the outside world as " synchronistic (events) point to a profound harmony between all forms of existence" (Jung, quoted in Coppin and Nelson, pp. 113). The alcoholic is exposed to the harmony between their personal world and the outer world in the meaningful coincidence. As the woman notes in the first story, "the walls crumpled-and the light streamed in" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 206) which can be interpreted metaphorically as the personal opening to the transpersonal through the synchronicity.

The next commitment of Depth Psychology from *The Art of Inquiry* that can be useful in interpreting the role of synchronicity in recovery is that the psyche is multiple and relational. Once the opening to the more than personal from the synchronicity is established, there can be a development of a continual openness to a higher power in the psyche, for "the invitation to the psyche is not extended once and that's all. Rather, the invitation is a continual posture of welcome over weeks and months, which can become a lifelong practice" (Coppin and Nelson, 2017, p. 120) As mentioned earlier in the paper, the third story of the woman revealing that "something" made her find the book notes confesses that she "believe(s) that we get more than one "moment of grace" from God—but it is up to us to seize the moment by taking action" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 517). The multiple instances of contact with a higher power suggests a lifelong practice of receptivity to the multiplicity of psyche which is a core commitment of Depth Psychology.

Further, the invitational aspect to the multiplicity of psyche can be seen in the group dynamics in AA. In the Big Book, it is mentioned by an alcoholic that "I found the Power greater than myself to be the magic above the heads of the people in the meetings" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 467). Here there is an opportunity for the "recognition of the role of synchronistic phenomena in providing unique opportunities for emergent processes to appear in focused group activities" (Cambray, 2012, p. 92) as synchronicity can be seen in the "magic" of the AA meeting, the sharing and

the wisdom that reaches the right ears at the right time. In the meetings, there is a receptivity to stories, as fellow alcoholics look for meaning on the same journey, which could contribute to the meetings as breeding grounds for synchronicities - in which synchronicities not only arise, but are also readily seen and received. Not just for personal help, but also for collective synchronicity. Perhaps it is the receptive attention in service to sobriety, perhaps it is magic, perhaps it is synchronicity.

This potential of synchronicity within the group of AA is also an inclusive, invitational reason why one need not feel left out if one hasn't experienced synchronicity. Even for someone who did experience a synchronicity, there can be a tendency to compare synchronicities. The man who found the coin admitted to his sponsor that he had hoped for something more dramatic, that perhaps it might not have been a spiritual awakening after all. He then realizes that what is important is that it worked for him, and the ongoing meetings is part of a program of spirituality. There is an acceptance of every alcoholic's capacity for finding God in their own way, in addition to the spirituality inherent in the workings of the program itself. As an alcoholic reveals, "Today my life is filled with miracles big and small, not one of which would ever have come to pass had I not found the door of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001, p. 475), thus demonstrating how the psyche can work through the alcoholic in a multiple and relational way through synchronicity and the Fellowship of AA.

Finally, synchronicity's role in recovery from alcoholism can be seen through the depth psychological commitment that the psyche is symptomatic. Coppin and Nelson write, "the symptomatic psyche is a fundamental assumption of depth psychology and the symptom is the way psyche attracts attention" (Coppin and Nelson, 2017, p. 141). The symptom of alcoholism can be seen in all three examples analyzed in this paper. In the first as the anger that was tempting the female alcoholic to get drunk again right before the synchronicity, in the second as the relapse on the airplane before finding the chip, and the third example as the state of helplessness in the apartment before finding the book. As mentioned in the discussion of the second example, the synchronicity could be viewed as compensatory with the fact that the 90 day sobriety chip was found during a moment of relapse. In all three cases the synchronicity accompanied the symptom and perhaps was a way the psyche worked through the symptom to get the alcoholic's attention. The fact that the psyche is symptomatic offers an interpretation of synchronicity as a way the psyche attracts meaningful attention to symptoms to help reach those who are suffering from addiction.

Alcoholism is one of the most difficult cycles to recover from, and it often takes more than a person's willpower to lift the disease. Synchronicity and Depth Psychology can bring us one step closer to understanding what can lift the disease and how the psyche can finally reach someone who is suffering from addiction. After all, Jung had connected with Bill W, founder

of Alcoholics Anonymous, on the subject of alcoholism, describing the alcoholics thirst for alcohol to be akin to the thirst for spirituality. In his letter to Bill W, Jung suggests that cure for alcoholism could be to have spirituality take alcohol's place, as he writes "spiritus contra spiritum" (Jung, 1961). Perhaps synchronicity could be a gateway for such a spiritual transition to occur as the psyche can finally reach the alcoholic.

In this paper I have examined three cases of recovery in *the Big Book* of Alcoholic's Anonymous for three qualities of synchronicity: "meaningful coincidence, acausal connection, and numinosity" (Cambray, 2012, p. 12). The potential presence of synchronicity at moments of recovery then provided a link between recovery and depth psychology, as synchronicity in recovery was interpreted through the Depth Psychological commitments that the psyche is both personal and more than personal, the psyche is multiple and relational, and the psyche is symptomatic(Coppin and Nelson, 2017). Synchronicity, connecting principle that it is, thus connected the fields of recovery and Depth Psychology, as each carrying a different portion of the map in describing the inexplicable workings of the psyche. And though both Synchronicity and Recovery are still difficult to explain, perhaps also like love, they might be better understood when different worlds are brought together.

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